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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the meaning and formation of children's play in order to (1) deepen understanding and respect for what play is, (2) demonstrate how young children cannot thrive or survive without play, and (3) give a common framework for interpreting and deriving meaning from the play behavior that occurs in the daily lives of young children. Described first are six major functions that play serves in childhood. The role that adults need to assume in relation to children's play is next discussed: it is contended that development is possible only when significant adults in a child's life provide adequate protection and nurturing and then allow the child to have what E. Eibesbeldt has described as "experimental dialogues with the environment" (in other words, opportunities to play). (MP)

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The Meaning and Function of Early Childhood Play

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If we were to visit a preschool child care center for a day, at some point we would most likely see a free play or free choice activity time. At this time we might see girls putting babies to bed in the doll corner, boys building a zoo or spaceship in the block corner, children making crowns and superhero capes out of construction paper at the art table. There might be a few children making pizzas at the playdough table and a few boys digging tunnels and caves for dinosaurs at the sand table.

The major developmental theories of Freud, Erikson, Piaget and Vygotsky have ascribed central importance to play in a child's development. They have stressed that children come to understand the concepts , ideas, and terms of the adult world in slow gradual steps and through thousands of experiences where concepts such as trust, fairness, friendship, number, weight, hard, soft, mediate and permeate long hours of fantasy play.

Much of this play with sand, clay, blocks, cups, saucers, doll babies, and paints can look unspectacular, insignificant and even unproductive to adults. And yet the experts tell us that the opportunities for these plain, ordinary, often repetitive games and routines provide the most comprehensive curriculum for the young child, and these opportunities provide the most lasting and convincing kind of learning. All evidence points to the fact that development cannot be accomplished through lecture, demonstration or direct didactic instruction alone. Development occurs only when adult instruction and guidance is accompanied by opportunities for play: opportunities for

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children to choose activities freely, to initiate and participate, spontaneously and voluntarily, in interactions with objects, peers and adults in the environment on their own terms. If the inner world of a child is to come to terms with the realities of the outer world, there must be room for give and take between both worlds. Play constitutes the most effective and satisfying means for achieving these developmental goals.

In this presentation this morning, I hope to show you how the affective and cognitive developmental needs of young children are met and fostered through play. The discussion will begin by examining six major functions that play serves in childhood. We will then consider the role that adults need to assume in relation to children's play. We will see how development is possible only when the significant adult's in a child's life provide adequate protection and nurturing, and then allow the child to have what E. Eibesbeldt has described as "experimental dialogues with the environment"; in other words, opportunities to play.

This discussion of the meaning and function of children's play aims to deepen our understanding and respect for what play is, and to demonstrate how young children cannot thrive or survive without it. It is aimed at giving us a common framework for interpreting and deriving meaning from the play behavior we see in the daily life of young children.

The six major functions of play that we will consider in our discussion this morning include:

1. The survival function of play to human beings as a species of life.
2. The role of play in fundamental cognitive learning and in language development.
3. The role of play in fostering problem solving and abstract thinking in young children.
4. The role of play in helping children master and control the expression of their feelings.
5. The role of play in making friendships possible and in sustaining emotional contact with peers and adults.

6. The role of play in teaching young children the meaning of being a boy or a girl.

Those psychologists who study animal behavior have given us a very powerful insight into the importance of play for the survival of human beings. Maria Piers and Genevieve Landau summarize the fundings of ethologists in their book, The Gift of Play.

> Everybody has seen a kitten playing with a ball of string or watched a puppy worry a shoe. It's fun to watch the antics of young animals at play, having a great time, much as human children do.
>
> But then there are other animals that don't play at all. Which one are these? The nonplaying animals are those that are almost ready to be independent, even at birth. Watch a newly hatched chicken. It takes only minutes before it can stand up, scratch the gravel for something to eat and hide under the mother hen's wings when something dangerous approaches. Without having been taught and without having practiced, the chick is independent after a few weeks; soon it is ready to mate and reproduce more of its kind. All the chicken has to do is follow its instincts--which are "programmed" into it by inheritance--to know how to respond to all situations. Unlike puppies, kittens or human children, a chick

doesn't need to play because it doesn't need to learn.

The animals that play are the ones that can benefit from experience, that can learn--both step by step and on occasion by leaps of the imagination. The ones that play are those that must learn by discovery and practice, acquiring through trial and error the skills they need to survive.

All intelligent creatures play. The "higher" the animal, the more prolonged is the play phase of life, the more varied and complex the play. In humans, play is the primary path to learning for the first five years or so...

One can say, in a sense, that the child's urge to learn by doing is our human "program". As lower animals are "programmed" to survive by instinct, we are "programmed" to survive by discoveries made through trial and error.

Self-directed practice-play is how a young child carries out the human program for survival. (pgs. 19, & 10[illegible])

Play, then, makes survival and flourishing of human beings possible.

Peter Reynolds has summarized the key ingredients of the human environment that enable a person to play and thus develop the potential for adpating to a changing environment. The flexibility of the human mind to think and develop options comes with

1. a long period of maturation and dependency on a caregiver;
2. a gradual increasing ability to manipulate objects and use them as tools to help accomplish a task;
3. a reliance on learning by observation - acquiring information from watching others and what comes before and after their actions;
4. developing sequences of actions by imitating others;
5. developing peer groups at a young age that become increasingly elaborated and developed through adolescence until these relationships become the social structure of their adult world.

The absence of human development and the absence of play when these five environmental conditions are not provided for the infant and young child were demonstrated in the studies of Rene Spitz in Europe during the 1930's and 40's. Spitz was concerned about the high infant mortality rates in orphanages, and for those infants who survived, the high incidences of mental and emotional retardation. As he investigated the environments, he found that the infants and children were housed in clean, tidy rooms, that there was plenty of light and nourishing food provided, they were bathed and fed daily, and the children's cribs were draped with clean white sheets daily to prevent the spread of germs. The children's physical well-being was provided for in every way, but the inadequacies of the social and emotional environment became evident to Spitz when he studied infants and children who lived in a nursery attached to a women's penetentiary. The children in this nursery did not have the high quality physical and medical care that was offered to the children in the orphanages but what they did have made the life and death difference: they had their mother's visits throughout the day providing for their physical needs in the context of an ongoing human relationship. Their

mothers came to bathe, feed, change their babies, and inevitably during the carrying out of these routines, they played, cuddled and cooed with their babies. In the interim periods, these infants were kept in a large nursery where all the sights, sounds, smells and bustle of human life was availble for them to interact with rather than being cut off from it as in the "solitary confinement" of infants in the orphanages. As Piers and Landau have stated "This seeming luxury, a caring person to cuddle and play with a child during his first year of life, seals the fate of the young human being. Babies who enjoy loving playmates learn - and live; the others are fated to vegetate, perhaps to die." (Piers & Landau, p.g 25)

A second major function that play serves in the early years of children's life is to provide them with the fundamental knowledge that they will carry with them and make use of throughout their life. There is an enormous amount that children learn about people, objects and events in their life that is never directly taught to them. Children learn that stuffed animals, diapers, and pillows are soft and that sidewalks, spoons and blocks are hard; that their kithen and bedroom of their house are near each other and grandma's house is far away; that objects and their bodies fall to the ground, not sideways or up into the air. All of the coordination of their sight with sounds in the environment with movements of their fingers, legs, and bodies has to be felt and experienced thousands of times in the context of daily living as an infant, toddler, and preschool child. Young children learn lessons about people too through play, that if they pull mommy's hair to hard, she'll give a yell, that brothers and sisters are sometimes kind and fun to have around and sometimes hateful rivals for mother's attention.

How young children learn to speak is perhaps the best example of how children's sensory motor talents become coordinated in the context of playful relationships with caretakers. It is clear to everyone that young infants do not learn to say their first words because their caretakers sit them down and give them formal lessons in the sounds and syllables of the English language and the rules for combining them to make words.

On the contrary, when an infant says "ga ga ga" as she plays with her stuffed dog, her mother might say, "Doggie! That's your doggie." She interprets the sounds and gestures as the child's intention of sharing and communicating the experience of her dog with her mother. Gradually, over the course of many months, the child's sounds achieve closer and closer approximation to the adults'. When the mother and infant play peek-a-boo games, Bruner points out that the infant has hundreds of lessons in the concept of turn-taking that is the basis of all dialogue and communicating. In other words, in the context of relating to the environment and to caretakers through play, the child gradually pieces together the entire system of communicating through oral language. Most of the developments in oral language have been accomplished by the age of three, and what an enormous accomplishement this is for not ever having one formal lesson but to have simply played with those who care for you! The staying power of the enormous amount of information that we absorb, sort out, digest, and remember in the first three years of life is evidenced by the fact that we never forget what we have learned. We never forget how to talk, how to roll a ball, how to nest pots and pans together, what hot surfaces feel like... What we learn through play: through trial and error, practice and repeated effort stays with us for a lifetime although much of what others would like us to learn as presented in formal lessons get lost and forgotten.

The third function of play that we will consider - the role of play in fostering problem solving and abstract thinking in young children, points us to a more important and significant implication of a child's capacity to play. The work of the psychologist, Jerome Bruner and his colleagues provides us with vivid evidence of the role of play in problem solving. Children, aged 3, 4, and 5 were given the following problem to solve: the child was seated at a table that had a transparent box placed about 3 feet in front of him. The box had a hook that opened the door, and there was a colored piece of chalk inside the box that the child could see. The child was given the task of fishing out the piece of chalk without getting out of his seat. The child was given 3 sticks and 2

clamps. There were four groups of 36 children presented with this task. The groups differed in the kind of preparation they were given before doing the task. One group of children was allowed to play with the sticks and clamps for 10 minutes; one group of children observed an adult do the task first before they had to do it, one group of children was simply told how the sticks and clamps could be used, and the last group was given no preparation or instruction in the task at all. The children were allowed to take as long as they wanted and they were given hints as they went along if they experienced difficulty. If they still failed to make progress from verbal hints, the adults stepped in to help them work with the materials. The findings were clear and striking: the children who had opportunities to play with the materials ahead of time, and those who observed the adults working with the materials were able to complete the task at a high percent of the time. Those children who received only verbal instruction or no training were for the most part unable to complete the task. They further found a difference between the two groups of children who were able to complete this task. Those that had opportunities to play ahead of time instead of observing an adult, came through in better spirits; they were less frustrated, gave up less easily, and could better make use of the hints from adults when they were presented. In short, they were "happier problem solvers." The authors summarize the three important effects that they feel the opportunity to play had for this group of young children: 1) problem solving requires a child to take self-initiated steps in a trial and error process, and the opportunity to play before tackling the problem encouraged the children to do this; 2) problem solving requires the child to coordinate several steps and sub-tasks in service of reaching a larger goal. The children who had time to play had time to try out several different strategies of ordering their actions; and 3) play reduces the stress of anticipating success or failure, it fosters a feeling a challenge as in a game and permits the child more room to feel involved in the process rather than in the "right" or "wrong" outcome. Thus these studies show us that the opportunity to play had a joint positive effect on the child intellectually and emotionally.

The fourth function of play that we will examine highlights how play helps children problem solve social and emotional difficulties in their lives. It is here that Erik Erikson has made his greatest contributions to child psychology. In his discussion of play in Childhood and Society, he goes back to one of Freud's observations of a healthy young boy at 18 months of age who was faced with separations from his mother, sometimes for many hours. The child was well behaved, progressing normally, and he had a close bond with his mother. The child developed one troublesome habit: he would fling under the bed or into a corner of the room all of the toys and small objects that he could get his hands on. The clean-up task was no small job! He would accompany this gesture with a long drawn-out "O-o-o-oh" which the mother and Freud were eventually able to interpret as meaning "go away". Freud gradually figured out that this was the child's game of playing "being gone" in reaction to experiencing his mother "being gone." He noticed one day that the child while playing on his cot with a toy like a yo-yo, would let the disc part roll under the bed with his familiar "O-o-o-oh", but then he would draw the disc out again by the string and this time, he'd greet the appearance with the word "da!" (there). Freud noted that this game included the full range of feelings and experience for the child - the disappearance and pleasurable return of the object which represented his mother. The game took on it's fullest form in an incident Freud further documented. One day the toddler greeted his mother after she was returning from an outing of several hours, by saying "Baby o-o-o-oh." At first this did not make much sense to the mother and Freud but soon they figured out that during the mother's absence, the boy had found a way to make himself disappear. He discovered his reflection in a long mirror, and he would crouch down in front of the mirror so that his reflection would go away, thus giving him the experience of "going away".

Erikson and Freud see 4 important things going on in this play. First, we have the 18 month old child faced with a painful problem - the separation from his mother which prevents her from hearing his cries and demands, and she comes back when it suits her,

not the child. The child invents a game which, although messy, provides the means for him to manage and eventually master the situation. In his game with the toys, he is in charge of sending someone away, in effect. Freud suggests that it represents an expression of anger: "If you don't want to stay with me, I don't want you." In his games with the disc on the string, he takes another step forward in dealing with the situation. As Erikson says, now "the little boy has the mother by the string. He makes her go away, even throws her away, and then makes her come back at his pleasure. He has ...turned passivity into activity; he plays at doing something that was in reality done to him. His third game reflects another step forward in mastering the separation problems he experiences with his mother's outings at this age. This time, he becomes the whole situation: he becomes master of the situation by going away from himself and returning to himself! His play has thus reflected three giant leaps: first he sends his toys away to parallel his feeling of being sent away and abandoned. Next he role plays his mother's position - he sends the toy away and brings it back when he's ready. Third, he incorporates both his own role and his mother's role in himself and his reflection in the mirror.

Erikson makes one additional comment that helps us to see just how successful these games are in helping the boy handle the situation. Erikson points out that a child this age could readily be expected to be angry and rejecting of his mother when she returned. He could have easily taken revenge and said to his mother in effect, I can take care of myself; "I don't need you." In such situations the mother then feels rejected and withdraws from the child which confirms the child's original fear: that mother did abandon him and leave him because he was bad, it was his fault. These scenarios take place frequently when parents and teachers are not aware of the recovery process that children have to go through after being separated from a loved one. The situation observed by Freud had a very different outcome in part because the boy had the strength to express his distress in play, but in part also because he was able to tell his mother

about the games, and his mother was able to accept with interest and pride his tremendous accomplishment. Erikson says: "He was then better off all around. He had adjusted to a difficult situation, he had learned to manipulate new objects, and he had received loving recognition for this method. All this is in child's play!" (p. 217-218)

When young children have experienced stressful or frightening events, they often regain their footing in their world by playing and replaying the worrisome event usually with that one important change that Erikson pointed out - "they put themselves in command of the situation, instead of being helpless and at the mercy of others." (Piers and Landau, p. 29-30) By role playing out the adult position of control and command, they practice over and over the feeling of what it means to be in control of themselves and their circumstances. Piers and Landau report the experience of a four year old boy, Peter, who's play behavior followed just this pattern when he returned home from the hospital from an emergency appendectomy operation. Peter had been a normal, healthy child who awoke one night in great pain. A doctor examined him immediately and diagnosed an acute appendicitis. The child was rushed into surgery; medically everything went fine and the boy's physical recuperation was rapid. However, there was a dramatic change in his play. Instead of his usual games of race car driver and policeman, Peter played "operation" morning, noon and night. He operated on his stuffed animals, he operated on his friends; there were frequent shots given and bandaging of wounds. Peter's mother became worried and annoyed. She thought that the child should be relieved to have the whole thing done with, and would simply want to forget the whole experience. His seeming inability to let go of the experience in subsequent weeks worried her. She consulted a psychologist who was able to help her see that Peter was doing the healthiest thing possible. He was gradually "forgetting" the experience but only after fully mastering it and "neutralizing" the terrifying and frightening aspects of it by role playing the operation - this time with one crucial difference; he was no longer in the role of powerless victim but was the doctor in command. The doctor in command

in this play situation is a metaphor for Peter being in command and back on his feet psychologically as well as physically; the role playing of "operation" represents the mending process in his inner world that correpsonds to the physical recuperation his body had to go through.

Our discussion of early childhood play so far has focused on the child playing in relation to caretakers and objects in the environment. It is now time to turn our attention to the fifth essential ingredient of the human environment that makes optimal development of the human mind possible as noted by Peter Reynolds - the child's ability to create ideas and share meanings not only with adults but with his peer group. As Reynolds described, the peer group relationships that are established and experienced during the preschool through adolescent years become the foundation for the social structures of the adult world. Thus our fifth and sixth functions of play to be examined this morning have to do with children's ability to make friends in a peer group and how they learn the meaning of being a "boy" and "girl". The concepts of friendship and boy and girl are highly influenced by adult attitudes and the kind of models that children are provided with, but in the end, a teacher cannot force two children to be friends. She can insist on civilized and fair treatment for all children in her class but she cannot call the shots in making or breaking friendships. As teacher Vivian Paley notes, "You cannot manufacture friendships to suit some notion you have of what a child needs." (White Teacher, p. 109) Vivian Paley recounts many moving episodes of children's struggles to gain friends and keep them. In her book, White Teacher. The following scene tales place among four kindergaretn girls.:

> One day Sylvia was the baby in the doll corner. She curled up in the crib and cried and kicked. Then she went to the kitchen cabinet and began pulling everything out and dumping the dishes and pots all over the doll corner floor. She was acting out the role of the bad baby. She was also going beyond that point where she could pull back on her own.

Rena was the mother, "Ok, girl. Don't mess with me. You are too bad. Out you go.

"I don't want to go out!" Sylvia screamed. Rena and Ayana held on to her hands and Ruthie said, "Pick up all the dishes, Sylvia, or you can't play with us."

Sylvia looked around her and saw the girls were serious. She screwed up her face and began hitting herself on the head softly with her fists. After a moment she stopped.

"I want to play," she said, bending down to pick up a dish. Ayana, Rena, and Ruthie helped.

"Pretend we just moved in," began Ruthie. "The moving man dropped all the boxes and now we have to put everything away on the shelf."

"Let's call the boss of the moving truck," said Sylvia, beaming, " and tell him about the bad moving man."

Rena dialed the telephone. "Mr. Moving Boss, we won't pay you because it was a bad job." Everyone was laughing as she hung up. The equilibrium was reestablished.

Sylvia's destructive behavior in the doll corner spoiled the play. The girls were not afraid of her behavior. In fact, had it not interfered with their play they might have enjoyed watching Sylvia throw things about. Instead the girls forced Sylvia to change her behavior. They offered her a continued role in the play group if she conformed, or banishment if she resisted. No teacher could make this offer. I could give her approval for positive behavior or the time-out chair for harmful behavior. However, I could not guarantee a place within the group. The prize they offered was worth huge effort it required for Sylvia to control herself. (pg. 86-87)

The teacher could have intervened in this situation and disciplined the children as to acceptable and unacceptable behavior but never could she have given the child the depth of shared feeling that can come from having a good friend.

A teacher's helplessness on this score is revealed in another episode in V. Paley's kindergarten. Among her class of white, black and asian children was a black child named Clair from the Carribean. She spoke some English, some French and some Creole. She was a shy, quite and awkward child that the children mostly ignored but sometines she was an easy victim of an angry attack. For the most part she had grown up around adults and she began her kindergarten year with almost no idea of what it meant to "pretend,"and no idea of how to make a friend. In the first few months of school she made rapid progress adjusting to the idea of group life - she adored painting pictures and enjoyed playing table games with the teacher. As the teacher describes:

> ...(the) children were discovering some very nice things about Clair. She accepted people as they were. She was always gentle and did anything one asked of her... If you needed a partner for a game, or if you wanted somebody to color with you, or if you were simply lonely and wanted company while you looked at a book, Clair made herself available when asked. And her happiness made you feel very important. (p. 92)

Clair was observing the other five year olds all along, and she was growing in leaps and bounds. But the one thing her teacher could not give her was a place among her peers. That battle she had to wage and win on her own, which she courageously did:

> Claire and I were having lunch with Joyce, Kenny, Philip and Ruthie. Claire couldn't stop talking. She was trying out conversational gambits she had been observing in others.
>
> "Whoever has an apple in their lunch raise you hand."
>
> "Whoever has peanut butter raise your hand."
>
> "Whoever has a napkin raise your hand."
>
> Each time Claire issued a command, the children responded. She was ecstatic. This was so easy. She never realized how simple it was to get children to do her bidding.
>
> After lunch, she went directly into the doll corner. "Everyone come into the doll corner and play with me. I'm going to give you coffee with sugar."

Joyce and Ruthie were already hammering at the workbench, and Kenny and Philip had begun to construct a building. No one even turned around.

Claire put on a big hat and high-heeled shoes and set the table.

"Joyce, come and play with me. I'm the mother." Joyce carefully measured a piece of wood and said nothing to Claire. Claire looked at me with an exasperated look. "Why they not come?"

"I don't know, Claire. Maybe they're too busy."

Claire brought a telephone over to Philip. "When I call you, Philip, come quick. You're the doctor."

Then she returned to the doll corner and dialed the other phone. "Hello, doctor. Hello, hello. Doctor, the baby is sick. Philip, you got to answer. You're the doctor. I just told you."

Philip ignored her so effectively I wanted to shout, "Answer the phone!" But I thought better of it. Let Claire see this through herself.

She dialed again. She would not give up. "Doctor, doctor, the baby is crying. She has a cold. Philip, pick up the telephone. It's ringing."

Joyce ran into the block corner. "Philip, will you pick up the phone? Are you deaf?"

Philip turned around very deliberately and lifted the receiver. "Stop bothering me. Claire. I don't want to play with you. Leave me alone. I never want to play with you!" He said this in such a loud angry voice, we all stopped our activities and looked at him. Claire turned to me and said, "But I told him. I told everybody. I'm the mother. I said to come have coffee. And the baby is sick, too." She stood in the middle of the doll house, bewildered.

All of a sudden, we heard "ring . . . ring . . . ring." It was Joyce dialing the phone. Claire looked at Joyce not knowing what she should do.

"Answer it," Joyce whispered.

"Hello," said Claire tentatively without picking up the receiver.

"Hello, this is Dr. Brown. I heard your baby is sick. Do you want a lady doctor?"

Claire burst into smiles. She reached for the phone so fast, she knocked it over. "Hello, Dr. Brown. Come quick. Bring medicine."

Joyce sat down next to the doll and examined it with the stethoscope. "Give her eight vitamins daily."

"Ok, Dr. Brown. Joyce, are you my friend now?"

Joyce was at the little sink filling a c p with water. She did not answer.

"Now you are my friend, Joyce?"

"Ok, ok. I'm your friend."

Play situations such as the one described above, demands that the child integrate all of her resources. She makes use of all that she knows about people, objects, language, and feelings when the goal is friendship and an opportunity to share a fantasy with a peer. The teacher can provide no richer learning experience for a child as he or she forges ahead with such determination to learn - if the route is through play.

Through toddlerhood and the early preschool years we see a slow but gradual distinction emerge between boys and girls. Initially both boys and girls are likely to find enjoyment in playing with dishes, cars, dolls, balls, and blocks. However, as they become mobile there is an increasing tendency "to model themselves after the real and idealized grownups of their own sex." (Piers and Landau p. 46) The girls tend to hover closer around the doll corner where they play out hundred of different scenes of family life: babies getting fed, diapered, spanked and sent to bed, dinners prepared for husbands and uncles, preparations made for going to a fancy ball, safeguarding the home against robbers and "bad guys."

For the boys, dramatic play takes form in the block area and gives rise to space ships, police raids and capturing of "bad guys", and construction of buildings, roads and train routes.

There are several important things to notice about this kind of play: 1) children begin to identify with the most observable characteristics of grownups of their sex. Girls see their mothers take command of the kitchen and the care of the children, and they play out this female role that they know best from experience. Boys, on the other hand, are not always able to get immediate "raw material" for their play from their fathers whose work is too abstract for the preschool child. Thus the preschool boy might place being a fireman, policeman or Spiderman on a much higher plane that office manager or lawyer simply because the work of those men is more readily comprehensible; 2) adult men and women are the models and sources of ideas for young children's play, but adults frequently feel uncomfortable with the direction the children's play commonly takes. Doll corner scenes among children of any background can often lead to babies being spanked, sent to bed without meals, deprived of TV...teachers and parents wonder if these young girls are going to grow up to be abusive mothers. The boys frequently construct guns out of leggo pieces or blocks and take to killing bad guys and rescuing Superhero figures in grand space battles. Again teachers and parents are quick to want to confiscate the GI Joe dolls and the guns, and cut this play off out of fear that these young boys are destined to be future criminals in society or war hawks. Unfortunately for many 4, 5 and 6 year old children, these rich opportunities for play are being replaced by hours of group instruction on practice in cutting, pasting, recognizing shapes, letters and numbers and numerous other seat work tasks. What is misunderstood is that such children's play is a natural healthy expression of the agression that gives rise to all development. Piers and Landau describe aggression as follows:

> Agression starts with life itself and serves an essential biological function. The earliest exploratory play of every infant has an aggressive character. The intensity with which a baby searches for and latches onto the nipple, the forceful way in which even a tiny baby waves his arms, flexes his legs, thrusting down hard against this mother's lap as if to stand up long before he can stand or even sit--such actions are aggressive. But this kind of aggression--the consequence of a biological drive--is not the same as hostile agression. Though agression may make an impact, sometimes an unpleasant one, on another person, agression itself is not necessarily hostile, even when it is in a true sense destructive. Rather, it is the same life-force that makes a seedling push upward, a young bird peck its way out of the shell and forage for food, a big fish devour a little fish or a cat consume a mouse. Aggression is a lifelong component of all play, learning and work. It is the force behind our highest achievements as well as our most terrible acts. Aggression can be expressed constructively or destructively, but it is only truly hostile when its principal aim is to injure someone or something. (p. 81)

In vigorous superhero and doll corner play, strong feelings are expressed and worked through but no one is actually hurt. The principle of sublimation is at work in it's most creative an effective form. Children are learning how to manage, contain, and control the fierce and sometimes scary feelings we all have. The children know that the shooting and the spankings are "make-believe" and that through "make-believe" one can acknowledge and express feelings in ways that other children can understand. The sharing of fantasies in doll corners and block areas can be compared to adults coming together for discussions and debates on topics which they care alot about. The difference is that children put their thoughts and feelings into the words and actions of powerful characters and dramatic plots.

The studies by Dorothy and Jerome Singer at Yale University document that preschool children who had rich opportunities for such aggressive fantasy play in fact scored higher on IQ tests than children who had not had opportunities for such play. Also

children who had played showed more highly developed language skills and, most importantly, showed a lesser tendency toward carrying out actual hostile and agressive acts. These findings concur with what our greatest novelists and playwrites have shown us for centuries. The works of Shakespeare, Dickens, O'Neill...present the drama of human nature in all of its conflicting paradoxes. Without man's dual potential for violence and love, there would be no history of literary work or artistic creation.

We have covered a wide range of functions that children's play can serve, and throughout the discussion we have referred to the importance of adult caretakers. I would like to take a few minutes to speak of this role that is so critical to a child's development through play. There are three aspects of this relationship that we have covered in the examples presented here. First, adults are needed in the child's environment to provide role models for what healthy functioning members of society do. The children must have heroes and heroines with which to identify, and their first hero and heroine are clearly mother and father, followed by other family members and then teachers.

Second, children depend upon adults to approve of and foster their opportunities to play. In the days before preschool, day care and Head Start became so widespread, children played continuously during their infancy, toddler and preschool years until they were ready for school or until they were required to join the family in earning a living. Now, with huge precentages of children under the age of seven in institutionalized care, we must conscientiously provide opportunities for children to engage in rich play. For some teachers and caretakers, this means achieving a tolerance for noise and mess in child care rooms. For some teachers, it also means accepting an idea that does not always seem convincing or obvious, but that is a basic tenet of developmental theory: children benefit more from play than from formalized lessons. Those children who have not had rich opportunities to play are at a disadvantaged intellectually, emotionally and socially.

This brings us to the third important function for the adult as children play: to provide protection, supervision, and when necessary, instruction in how to play. The idea of "instructing" children in how to play may seem like an odd one but I commonly hear teachers say to groups of young children who are beginning to race around a room in great excitement: "Ok, boys and girls since you don't know how to play nicely, there will be no playing at all." The teacher proceeds to set up the tables with worksheets to color and the children are confined to chairs and isolation from one another as they work quietly by themselves. What gets forgotten at these times is that children can be taught social skills and play skills as easily as they can be taught alphabet skills. Often our disciplining rather than teaching children positive social behavior, makes them harbor anger, resentment and shame as they brood in silence for having been punished for something that they hadn't had an opportunity to fully learn yet.

I saw one teacher of four year old children help instruct children in play when the following situation arose: three boys and two girls began to chase each other back and forth from the block building area to the work tables, and as they began weaving in and out of the tables squealing, shouting and pulling on each other's clothes, the head teacher said sharply: "Hey, what's going on here. Stop that running right now! I want the five of you to sit down here for a minute and listen to me. Now what are you doing?" The children blurted out that Batman and Robin were on a resue mission to free Spiderman and Wonderwoman from the space invaders. The teacher said "This sounds like a good story but you are disturbing Richie and Sam who are trying to play a game of Candy Land, you are making it impossible for the children in the book area to listen to stories, and you almost knocked over the painting easles as you raced by. You know that the classroom rule is no running. And also, you are not to pull on each others' clothes because you'll tear them and hurt each other."

One child said, "But I'm Spiderman and she's Wonderwoman and we have to try to put spiderwebs on the space invaders!" The teacher said, "Alright, if you need to put nets

on people you can pretend to like this, just like you showed me yesterday." And she demonstrated how they could carry out the action by raising their hands, stretching their fingers wide apart and making a swooshing sound. She then said, "Now come with me; we'll go over to the block area where you have your space ship built and we'll see how we can play this game so that one gets hurt and you don't disturb others." The teacher went with the children and helped them to see that they would have to confine their play to one half of the block rug. Then she said, "now let's pretend the space invaders are coming. Let's get ready to put our webs on them." The children were back deep into their fantasies and the teacher stepped back gradually and they were able to continue for another 10 minutes before they moved on into other activities

The teacher in this classroom was providing instruction, supervision and protection to these children as they played by taking their ideas seriously and their safety, and that of the other children seriously. She did not permit a deteriorating situation to upset the room; she stopped it, dealt with it and helped the children regain healthy limits to the expression of their fantasies. Infants, toddlers and preschool children need a healthy adult's ego functioning near by them at all times. They need to acquire all of these tools and resources that adults have developed that help one achieve a balance between their inside world and their outside world. There are times when children's actions tell us that they need us close by as if to say: "I need you and your skills to become interwoven with mine, I'm not managing too well." There are times when children ask us to stand back and give them more space to work in as if to say:" I want to see how well I can manage on my own. I want to see how much I have mastered and how much is in me. But if I start to falter and use bad judgment, of course I expect you to jump in and get me back on the right track and stay with me as long as it takes until I find my footing again." Children want to stay in touch with us. Human development is acomplished through human processes - how we help them manage situations, how disruptions and disagreements get handled has everything to do with how inner cohesiveness gets restored to the child's inside world.

In the biographical and autobiographical writings on and by our greatest scientists, artisits, scholars and statesmen, we find over and over again, the seed of genuis found in their capacity to play with ideas and play with new combinations of possibilities. Conrad Lorenz, the great German ethologist, points out that human beings are the only animals that are capable of play and capable of playing throughout their life time (Bruner, Pg. 90). In all other animals, play and development give way to patterned behavior when they achieve adulthood. It is clearly our duty - and privilege -to set the stage for life long healthy creative development by allowing children to play, helping them to play and by taking joy in their play during these most vulnerable years of human development.

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